FRONT PORCH SERIES
BROADCAST CALLS

Facilitating Children's Friendships: The Adult's Role in Supporting Peer Relationships

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Q: One of the ways we think about being able to increase social interaction is a little bit counter-intuitive because it's actually about limiting the number of children in a certain learning center. Our teachers get conflicting information about this. One is the suggestion to limit the number of children in learning centers during what we typically call free choice time. But the other side of that is, is it really free choice when we're limiting the number of children that can go to a certain learning center? What's your perspective on that?

A: [Ostrosky] I think you really have to pay attention to the physical environment in your classroom and also know the children within your classroom, because what may work—even in how you lay out your physical environment— one year may not work the next year. You might have a younger group, you might have more threes than fours, or more fours than fives, that are more active. Or you may have one or two particular children who see an open space and spend a lot of time running. So that's one thing; what works one year may not work the next year, or with the addition of some new children who have different temperaments, different personalities. But the other thing is, if we have too many centers open where children have free choice and can go anywhere, we could end up with ten centers and one child in each of eight of those centers and a group of children in another classroom. So if your goal is just that children are playing independently, that might work. If your goal is to encourage social interaction, you might want to think about condensing those centers, then, to having only five centers open today. And maybe the next day you have four of those same ones and a different one open, so, doing some rotating. But a lot of it has to do with the space in that particular center. Too many children in a dramatic play area fighting over the pots and pans to use, or who's going to give the shot to the stuffed animal dogs, is not going to be positive, is not going to encourage friendship development, positive social interaction. So in that case, limiting to a few children.

If you limit the children in a center, after a little bit of time, children [may] choose another center to go into after maybe 10 or 15 minutes. Maybe the center time is 30 minutes long, so then they go to a different center to give other children access to that dramatic play area.

[Meyer] Sometimes it seems difficult because you want to provide children with lots of choices, but we also think about it on a continuum. You want to support children when making choices might be difficult. When I think about assigning buddies, sometimes children can choose who they want to play with and which center they choose to go to together. Another time you might choose a partner for them. But you're choosing a partner mindfully. And you're thinking about who that child may really get along with, and also thinking about children having exposure to all of their peers in the classroom. You might notice some children that always seem to play together but making sure they're getting opportunities to interact and engage, and try out their social skills with all the children in the classroom. Teachers may have to plan for that to occur because some children may naturally not engage with others. There's also creative ways of structuring your environment and your interactions so that children will naturally go to the kind of buddies that you want them to go with. It might be that one child really enjoys playing with another peer in the classroom. So you let the peer choose, and then let that child pick immediately where they want to go, so they can go to a center while there's still opportunity to be at that center with the peer.

So I think it's a continuum. Sometimes you can allow choice and then sometimes you can structure the environment so that you're supporting children's peer relationships, if that's your goal.

Q: What would be a good school readiness goal in terms of social competence or social interaction?

A: [Ostrosky] I'd want all children to feel that they were accepted in that classroom community. So that's even maybe more big picture; that children felt welcomed, they felt good about themselves in that classroom community. But if I thought about friendship skills, some of them too were being able to gain entrée into a play activity, to maintain multiple turns. Being able to engage in social interactions with other children, solve conflict, have some of those social skills that really lead to the development of friendships.

[Meyer] I would agree. Friendship is the overall outcome and goal that we ultimately want children to develop because we know within those friendships they can support learning and help adjustment into school. But if we're focusing on how we can help a child develop those friendships, it's their interactions, and focusing on all the skills that are necessary to have positive interactions with peers.

Q: Why should we even care about children's friendships? I mean, we're really focused on school readiness. Is there even a connection between children's friendships and academic school readiness?

A: [Ostrosky] There's lots of research to show that children who have good social competence skills do better academically. They learn more from their peers, they feel better about themselves, they like going to school. And then there are lots of long-term outcomes to show [that for] children who have good social skills, it impacts your quality of life. It impacts how you feel about yourself. So, back to our initial "jot down some information about those special friends in your life," most of us couldn't imagine our life without those. And it could be one friend. It doesn't have to be "I have 30 friends" or "I have," as my son would say, "so many followers on Instagram." That doesn't matter; it's those close friendships. What we can do to support those really impacts quality of life and better outcomes for children.